PARLIAMENT AS A MIRROR TO THE NATION:

Promoting Diversity in Representation through Electoral Reform

ABSTRACT

This article argues that a primary goal of reforming the electoral system is to ensure that Parliament is a mirror to the nation, as opposed to the argument that it attempts to create a mirror of the nation. Of particular interest is how adopting a mixed member proportional system could broaden the "selectorate" of candidates, thereby promoting the emergence of new and more diverse voices within Parliament, including those of women, minority group members and Aboriginal peoples. Although electoral reform is not a panacea for addressing the representational deficiencies that characterize the existing political landscape, it is a vital first step to improving democratic governance in Canada.

The idea that Parliament should be a mirror or microcosm of the nation can be traced back to the utilitarian philosophers Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. In their view, representatives were neither trustees of the nation's well-being, as Edmund Burke had argued in his famous speech to the electors of Bristol, nor were they delegates acting at the behest of their constituents. Instead, their "essential function [was] to constitute, in themselves, a microcosm of the nation" (Birch 1971: 55). If Parliament were a miniature replica of society, then the elected representatives' pursuit of their own self-interest would necessarily result in decisions that would maximize the happiness of the community as a whole.

This understanding of representation, not surprisingly, has come under attack for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it would seem to be utterly utopian to try to ensure the election of a representative sample of society. What demographic criteria would be used to determine which groups ought to be represented in Parliament? Perhaps a majority will agree that women as a group ought to be fairly or equally represented in the legislature. But what about Aboriginals? Ukrainians? Persons of mixed Italian-French heritage? Catholics? Wiccans? Left-handers? Short people? Critics of the notion of demographic or mirror representation frequently employ a *reductio ad absurdum* such as this to try to demolish the claims that Parliament ought to be a miniature replica of the nation.

Another, more fundamental flaw in the idea of mirror representation centres on the nature of representation itself: if a woman or an individual from a particular ethnic group is elected to Parliament, does he or she represent the interests of *all* members of the same demographic category? Do all women identify with Belinda Stronach, for example, simply because she is a woman? Can a person represent members of different ethnic, religious or class backgrounds? In a complex, heterogeneous society which values inclusion and pluralism, should we not encourage elected members of the legislature to speak for, to represent, as broad a cross-section of society as possible? Would this not be one of the most effective ways of breaking down barriers of mutual incomprehension and suspicion that still persist among rival ethnic, religious and class-based communities?

These criticisms of the idea of mirror representation have been deployed against proposals for a new electoral system in Canada, such as the one contained in the recent report to Parliament by the Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada* (2004). The Law Commission advocates the adoption of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system similar to those now used in Germany, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales. The House of Commons would consist of 308 seats, as it does now, but only two-thirds of these seats (202) would be awarded to the candidates winning a plurality of the vote in constituency races. The remaining 106 seats would be allocated to the provinces and distributed on the basis of each party's share of the provincial vote. This second tier of seats would compensate for distortions in the first-past-the-post portion of the vote. Each voter would be assigned two votes, one for a candidate in his or her riding, and another for a party list.

The Law Commission contends that the party list portion of the ballot would lower the barriers to election now faced by women, minorities and Aboriginals in the existing first-past-the-post system. In effect, the new system would allow for a form of affirmative action, whereby parties could place women and minority candidates in favourable positions on the list portion of the ballot in order to increase their chances of election (Law Commission of Canada, 2004: 62; Schwartz and

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Rettie, 2002: 51; Young, 1994: 6). This is currently the practice in most western European countries that have adopted a form of proportional representation, and helps to explain *in part* why many European nations have much higher proportions of women among their elected representatives than do Canada and the other countries that employ first-past-the-post electoral systems.

One critic of this proposal raised the spectre of "social engineering" as the ultimate goal of the Law Commission. An MMP system, in this view, would alter the basis of representation in Canada, from a system based on "the principle of equality of individuals to a system of representation based on group membership" (Archer 2004). The list of groups demanding representation in Parliament under such a system would constantly expand, according to Archer, fostering unrealistic and unrealizable expectations among a welter of social interests that they would be guaranteed representation in the legislature.

We argue that this critique of proportional representation misses the mark. The objective of electoral reform in Canada is not to transform Parliament into a mirror *of* the nation, but rather to ensure that it is a mirror *to* the nation, a body in which a citizen can see him or herself reflected, however imperfectly. Because individual identities are complex and multiple, this mode of representation can at most mean that citizens must believe that their chances of getting elected, or the chances of people "like them" winning a seat in Parliament, are on an equal footing with those of the dominant group of elected representatives – older, affluent white males. This is where a new electoral system, one which incorporates a degree of proportionality through a party-list portion of the ballot, could produce results, by increasing the chances for election of non-traditional types of candidates. MMP, by broadening the "selectorate" of candidates, could promote the emergence of new and more diverse voices within Parliament.

Whether or not a majority of Canadians implicitly accept the notion of mirror representation, we do know that they are troubled by the "appearance" of existing legislatures in the country. The Law Commission's citizen engagement process for its electoral reform project underscores this fact. Of particular concern for many citizens was that Parliament and provincial legislatures should, to the greatest extent possible, reflect the composition of society. For a growing number of Canadians, the fact that they do not is no longer acceptable.

When it comes to demographic representation, first-past-the-post performs poorly. For example, if we measure the representation of women in terms of the percentage elected to the lower house in various countries, Canada, with 21% female legislators, ranks 34th in the world, after most of European countries (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2005). As the data in Table 1 show, the proportion of women elected to the legislature in countries using list-PR electoral systems is about 10 percentage points higher than in countries using a mixed or semi-PR system (30.4% versus 19.9%), which in turn is about 2 percentage points higher than in countries with first-past-the-post systems.

Statistically, the difference between first-past-the-post and mixed member proportional on this indicator is not huge. However, Arseneau (1990: 140), examining the experience of New Zealand after it adopted a mixed member proportional system in the mid-1990s, shows that the first election conducted under this system, in 1996, resulted in a "record number of women and Maori Members of Parliament." Most important, from her perspective, was that women and Maori candidates tended to be most successful in the list (compensatory) seats.

Table 1 – Women Legislators in Lower Houses of Advanced Industrial Democracies, 2005

Electoral System	Country	% women legislators	Average (mean)
List-PR	Sweden	45.3	30.4
	Norway	38.2	
	Finland	37.5	
	Denmark	36.9	
	Netherlands	36.7	
	Spain	36.0	
	Belgium	34.7	
	Austria	33.9	
	Iceland	30.2	
	Switzerland	25.0	
	Luxembourg	23.3	
	Portugal	19.5	
	Israel	15.0	
	Greece	14.0	
STV	Ireland	13.3	11.3
	Malta	9.2	
MMP/ MMM	Germany	32.8	19.9
	New Zealand	28.3	
	Italy	11.5	
	Japan	7.1	
FPTP	Canada	21.1	18.1
	UK	18.1	
	USA	15.0	
Majoritarian	Australia	24.7	18.5
	France	12.2	
All PR/ semi-PR	(N = 20)		**26.4**
FPTP/ Majoritarian	(N = 5)		**18.2**

Source: Adapted from Studlar (1999: 129, Table 10-1). Data compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union website http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm (date accessed, 20 March 2005).

Approximately a third of Canadian voters in 2000 believed that the under-representation of women in the House of Commons constituted a problem (Howe and Northrup, 2000: 17, Table 7). Electoral reform that brings some element of proportionality into our existing system would undoubtedly ameliorate the situation, though to what extent remains to be seen. For example, Arseneau (1999: 144) points out that while the proportion of female legislators in New Zealand increased after the adoption of MMP, the percentage of women in cabinet positions actually dropped.

Ethnic minorities and Aboriginals also have fewer representatives than their share of the population warrants: they constituted 11 and 3.5%, respectively, of the Canadian population in 1996, but only 6% and 2% of Members of Parliament (Howe and Northrup, 2000: 19). As with the under-representation of women, some 35% of Canadian voters find this situation to be cause for

concern, and nearly half of voters are favourable to measures that would increase the number of ethnic and Aboriginal candidates running for office (Howe and Northrup, 2000: 20). With respect of Aboriginal peoples, 57% of respondents favoured creating seats in Parliament for Aboriginal representatives (Howe and Northrup, 2000: 19).

As we noted above, the advantage that proportional representation systems have over first-past-the-post in promoting demographic representation is thought to stem from the fact that the lists drawn up for compensatory seats (in mixed member proportional) or multi-member districts (List-PR) can be used to place women and minority candidates in a favourable position, making their election all the more likely (they allow, in other words, for a form of affirmative action). And while proportional representation alone may not be sufficient for securing effective representation of women, minority group members and Aboriginal peoples, at the very least, it presents "fewer barriers to achieving demographically representative outcomes than do single member systems" (Schwartz and Rettie, 2002: 51; Young, 1994: 6).

Although electoral system reform can help address the representational deficiencies of the status quo, it is not a panacea. For example, even if Canada adopted a MMP system, there are other considerations related to representation within electoral politics that would need to be addressed. Issues relating to campaign financing, party recruitment policies, and the inclusion of women and minority group candidates in cabinet, among others, would also need to be addressed to ensure that a broader diversity of voices are included in the system of democratic governance.

It is also important to recognize that representational issues extend beyond electoral politics. In their analysis of contemporary forms of representation, Earles and Findlay (2003: 10) advocate for a broader notion of representation that embraces ideas of participatory democracy and other meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in their democracy. Although the authors recognize the importance of electoral politics, as this remains a vital location for political action, they also suggest that we must adopt other methods for women, members of minority groups, the poor, and Aboriginal people to gain a voice in the system of democratic governance. For Earles and Findlay, "[t]his view of representation, which encompasses a more diverse set of interests, identities and ideas, must bridge the gap between representative and participatory democracy, and include not only elected politics, but also non-elected and non-state spheres" (2003: 60).

Overall, we argue that the importance of electoral reform stems from the opportunity it presents for including a broader diversity of voices in the political decision-making process. In this respect, the debate over changing the electoral system so that our elected representatives better "mirror the nation" is misplaced. As we noted at the outset, it is overly optimistic and unreasonable to believe that the House of Commons or a provincial legislature can adequately mirror the representational make-up of Canadian society. As well, even it this goal were attainable it would not guarantee effective representation.

Our argument is that allowing a broader diversity of voices in the legislature not only provides an opportunity to enrich the electoral process as it currently exists, but also represents a starting point for further reflection about the nature of representation in Canada's increasingly diverse society. One of the ways to accomplish this is through the election of more women, minority candidates and Aboriginal peoples who come from different backgrounds than the typical Member of Parliament or provincial legislatures. And while electoral reform is not a panacea for addressing the representational shortcomings that characterize the existing political landscape, it is a vital first step to improving democratic governance in Canada.

The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Law Commission of Canada.

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